'They call me wonder woman': the job jurisdictions and workplace learning of higher level teaching assistants

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‘They call me wonder woman’: the job jurisdictions and work-related learning of higher level teaching assistants.

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Abstract

This paper reports on an in-depth interview study of the roles, job jurisdictions and associated learning of higher level teaching assistants (HLTAs). This role has the core purpose of covering classes to enable teacher release for planning, preparation and assessment. HLTAs’ individual job jurisdictions are described and discussed as are implications for their knowledge and practice. The HLTAs are found to have wide-ranging job domains and, sometimes, unexpected involvements which mean they have to improvise practice. The study acknowledges that these HLTAs are being creatively managed and deployed by head teachers for the sake of teachers and schools. However, they are, at times, required to take on planning and cover duties which are beyond their knowledge and training with a likely impact on children’s learning. Given their training and experience it is asked if covering classes to release teachers is the most effective use of their abilities and time.

Keywords: higher level teaching assistants, job jurisdictions, para-professionals, workplace learning, improvised learning

Introduction

> ‘… formalized job descriptions are only loosely related to reality; the actual division of labour is established through negotiation and custom.’
>
> (Allen, 2001, p.27)

Occupational roles are constantly being re-shaped and re-defined, and, as Allen reminds us above, we can expect a mismatch between a formal conception of a job and the way employees actually perform a role. In reality, employers and employees often find themselves responding to the unanticipated needs of working environments.

Para-professionals, with their many job titles and roles, have long played a part across the public services and there are early examples to be found. For instance, in 1854, Florence Nightingale trained a group of volunteer nurses to support hard pressed medical staff during the Crimean War. Recent times have witnessed much change and occupational restructuring within and across the public services in the United Kingdom (UK). Conservative and Labour governments have sought to 'modernise' services and 'extract economy, efficiency and effectiveness' (Entwistle, Marinetto, & Ashworth, 2007, p.169) from them. Performance management, regulation, inspection, targets and league tables with performance indicators have been introduced as ways of achieving the required changes.

As well as seeking to re-conceptualise what it means to be a modern professional in the twenty first century, the UK government has actively promoted the role of para-professionals to achieve a more effective 'skill or personnel mix' (Buchan, Ball & O'May 1996). Professionals have been encouraged to delegate certain 'low level' tasks to para-professionals thus, it is said, enabling the former to attend specifically to the work that they are qualified to do. (Bach, Kessler, & Heron, 2007).

Between 1998 and 2005, the UK Labour Government increased public sector employment by 690,000 (Livesey, Machin, Millard, & Walling, 2006, p. 425). Many of these employees are para-professionals supporting the work of qualified professionals. Notable workforce expansions can be seen, for instance, in the numbers of community support officers in policing, social work assistants, healthcare assistants, and teaching assistants. By and large, these employees have modest formal qualifications but, nevertheless, are often required to be at the unpopular, even complex, end of practice. Para-professional can therefore be immersed in what Hughes (1984) has referred to as 'dirty work' – work that professionals would rather delegate and distance themselves from.

For police community support officers, with limited formal powers, this can mean dealing with the anti-social behaviour of people on the street; and teaching assistants, with a minimum of training, can find themselves working with children whose challenging behaviour and learning needs test the skills of qualified teachers. In the UK the paraprofessional workforce is also highly feminised, certainly in social work, health care and education. Two factors seem related to this. Firstly, the part-time, hourly paid, nature of a great deal of para-professional employment gives some time for family-related responsibilities that many women continue to have. Secondly, women with experience of managing a family and caring for children and relatives, can bring particular skills and understandings that are important to much of the day-to-day people-focused work of the public services. These perceptions also contribute to the persistence of a largely female workforce and to the maintenance of low levels of pay.

Teaching assistants

Teaching assistants have long been a feature of primary school classrooms. From the initial recruitment of unpaid parent helpers and paid auxiliaries in post 2nd World War times, it is possible to identify various manifestations of this support role. For instance, after the Warnock Report (1978) and the 1981 Education Act there was increased awareness of the needs of children deemed to have special educational needs and this led to the recruitment of special needs assistants. During the 1990s, the numbers of generalist classroom assistants who provide support for all children grew; and from 1994, a new role of specialist teacher assistant was created to focus, primarily, on helping children with basic skills in reading, writing and mathematics. Since 1998, teaching assistants have been substantially involved in the national literacy and numeracy strategies (DfEE, 1998, 1999), often with a 'compensatory' brief, running intervention programmes and booster classes for some 25 per cent of children in primary schools who are perceived as not engaging with or benefiting from a teacher's teaching (Earl, Levin, Leithwood, Fullan, & Watson, 2003; Hancock & Eyres, 2004).

To a large extent the growth of this educational para-professional workforce has been an unplanned one and early studies noted shifting work boundaries between assistants and teachers (for instance, Lee & Mawson, 1998; Mortimore & Mortimore, 1992,

Moyles & Suschitzky, 1997). Teaching assistant occupational boundaries have slowly but surely been reshaped to include increasing amounts of work – particularly in the areas of teaching, planning and assessment - that hitherto would only have been carried out by qualified teachers (Hancock, Swann, Marr, Turner, & Cable, 2002). As this support workforce has grown, established its contribution to classrooms and generally come of age, 'upskilling' and diversification continues to take place (Butt & Lance, 2005; Garner, 2002; Milner, 2008). This is also confirmed by Blatchford et al., (2009, p.5) who note the 'wider pedagogic role' of support staff.

Stephen Adamson (1999), in a review of the published literature, concluded that researchers noted a lack of clarity about teaching assistant roles and reported an enlargement of role in terms of supporting children's learning which brought them closer to the work of a qualified teacher. The main difference between teachers and teaching assistants, Adamson suggested, 'crystallises around planning' (p. 15). With regard to training, it was found that there were increasing opportunities for the majority of teaching assistants, both in the workplace and at colleges, but there were issues around cost and accessibility.

Since Adamson's review, there have been further reviews of the teaching assistant literature. Howes, Farrell, Kaplan and Moss (2003) looked at the impact of paid adult support on children's participation and learning through a review of 24 studies. The reviewers identified the significance of the local community and cultural understandings of support staff and the way they can provide effective socio-cultural mediation between teachers, children and parents which, they conclude can have a favourable impact on learning. The reviewers highlight a need for more studies that tap into the experiences of children when support staff work with them (for instance, Eyres, Cable, Hancock, & Turner, 2004; Fraser & Meadows, 2008).

Cajkler et al. (2006) conducted an in-depth review of 17 studies that included perceptions of the work of teaching assistants working in primary schools. These perceptions came from teachers, head teachers, support staff, parents and children. Parents and children, however, were not well represented in these research studies. The review concluded that teaching assistants 'were believed to make significant contributions to academic and social engagement' (p. 4). The review also pointed to

the widening functions of assistants and the way they are making pedagogic decisions although their levels of subject knowledge may not prepare them to do this effectively.

Alborz, Pearson, Farrell and Howes (2009) selected 35 studies for review to consider the impact of adult support staff on the participation and learning of children. They conclude that the deployment of teaching assistants has successfully given support to teachers on a number of levels. However, they highlight that teaching assistants' need effective management, training and a clear career structure. They also believe that teachers need complementary training in collaborative working – a need that has been identified for some time (Mortimore & Mortimore, 1992).

With regard to the research focus on teaching assistant impact, as with teachers, teaching assistants are included in a school's performance data, are overseen and observed by teachers in a school, and acknowledged in Ofsted inspections (for instance, Ofsted, 2002, 2008). Given this level of scrutiny it seems reasonable to infer a degree of impact comparable to that of teachers.

Higher level teaching assistants

The need for a 'higher' teaching assistant role can be seen as a natural workforce development given the gradual extension of teaching-related roles reported by many studies, and the advanced contribution that some teaching assistants were making. However, the impetus for the HLTA role arose out of the English Government's response to an independent report which confirmed significant teacher overload (Price Waterhouse Cooper, 2001). This overload, it can be argued, came about because successive governments had introduced a stream of curriculum reforms and bureaucratic requirements linked to accountability, testing, and competition between schools.

The Government's response was to establish a 'status' of higher level teaching assistant. Teaching assistants with this status could cover classes so that teachers can be released for 'planning, preparation and assessment' (PPA). The creation of this HLTA role was set within a wider ambitious reform related to 'workforce remodelling' – in effect, a review of school staffing structures, revisions to teachers'

performance management, and new professional standards. The HLTA cover role and workforce remodelling proposals were signed by all teacher unions (ATL *et al.,* 2003) with the exception of the National Union of Teachers who saw the idea as undermining of a teacher's professional status:

> 'Cover Supervisors' or 'Higher Level Teaching Assistants' who are not qualified teachers should not be a substitute for those qualified teachers employed to cover.' (NUT, 2003, p.12)

Despite the opposition of the largest teacher professional body, the reform went ahead and many primary schools in England are now using HLTAs to release teachers from classes for PPA time and also to cover the short term absences of teachers when they are on courses or unwell. HLTAs also relieve teachers of certain administrative duties, however, as with teaching assistants, HLTAs can also work with groups of children and individuals needing their specialised support and teaching. Given their teaching assistant backgrounds, such individualised work with children is an area of confidence and skill for all HLTAs. Covering classes serves to take them away from this work. In some situations, HLTAs receive different payment levels depending on the type of role they are carrying out. HLTAs are formally assessed against 33 standards arising from the professional standards for teachers (TDA, 2007). There are currently 21,000 HLTAs in England (Burgess & Shelton Mayes, 2009)

Since the first cohort of HLTAs began their work in 2004 there have been studies which have focused specifically on their training and assessment (Burgess & Shelton Mayes, 2009; Pye Tait, 2006), their numbers, duties and deployment (Blatchford et al., 2007), their impact (Wilson, 2007) and their deployment and impact (Blatchford et al., 2009). As has happened with teaching assistants, the newly born HLTA literature needs to include fine grain studies that provide insider accounts from individual HLTAs themselves as they go about managing their roles and jurisdictional boundaries on a day-to-day basis. This paper aims to provide such a study.

The research study

We report here on a small-scale interview study which aimed to obtain individualised data from HLTAs working in primary, first and middle schools in the north of England. The four principal objectives of the research were to investigate:

- the specific responsibilities of HLTAs;
- their ways of working;
- the patterns of their deployment;
- their formal training and workplace learning.

Our interviews were conducted in a semi-structured, conversational way (Burgess, 1984; Simons, 1981). Our interview schedule aimed to elicit responses related to the nine themes of: entry into support work; application for HLTA status; deployment, oversight by teachers, responsibilities, difference to teachers, parental contact, appraisal, and training. However, we encouraged the interviewees to develop their responses in ways that were meaningful to them. We were not able to triangulate this data with observations of the HLTAs in action or interviews with teachers, children, and parents, although the degree of consistency between interviewees does afford some confidence in our findings.

As our title suggests, after Abbott (1988) we wish to describe and understand the 'job jurisdictions' (in terms of the range and boundaries of duties) of our interviewees but we are also concerned with the practice knowledge and learning that sustain these jurisdictions. In his study, Abbott's central focus is with the structure and control of expertise in society, and the way in which 'the system of professions' provides a means for linking professions to the tasks they perform. He explores how professions in the United States, England and France define, maintain and control their respective professional jurisdictions.

Abbott is primarily concerned with inter-professional jurisdictions but we feel the concept of job jurisdiction can usefully be applied within a profession like teaching. It can be used to examine the nature of the duties of people with different job titles, and

also the range of these duties vis-à-vis others in a workforce – in this paper, the jurisdictional boundaries between HLTAs and qualified teachers.

The HLTAs

Our study included nine HLTAs based in schools, and in a pupil referral unit (PRU - for pupils unable to attend school for various reasons e.g. pregnancy, medical needs, exclusion) in North Tyneside, Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumberland and Cleveland. Our selection arose out of a mixture of established school contacts (through previous association with The Open University) and recommendation by local authority officers. Five HLTAs were interviewed face-to-face in their schools and four by telephone. Our fieldwork was undertaken between January and April 2007. Table 1 provides information on gender, age, employment, school, and qualifications. The average age of the group was 48; the youngest person was 31 and the oldest 63. Overall, the group contained HLTAs with a range of formal qualifications. These included specific teaching assistant qualifications like the Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate through to Foundation Degrees and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) - one means of obtaining qualified teacher status within England for holders of a first degree.

Table 1 Interviewee details

HLTA	**Age**	**Employment**	**Type of school**	**Academic qualifications**
Erica	56	Full time -only HLTA in the school.	Primary School (5-11 years) 380 on roll	BTec Nursery Nursing Foundation Degree (Early years) BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies Early Years Professional Status
Kate	50	Full time -only HLTA in the school	Primary School (4-11 years) 200 on roll	Nursery Nurse (NNEB) Foundation Degree (Childhood Studies) BA (Hons) Early Childhood and Curriculum Studies
Carol	63	Full time -only HLTA in the school.	Primary School (3-11 years) 366 on roll	BTech Nursery Nursing BA (Hons) Early Years
Jill	41	Part time (4 days) - only HLTA in school.	Primary School (4-11 years) 250 on role	NVQ 2 (Teaching Assistant) Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate BA (Hotel management and Catering)
Yolanda	37	Full time -only HLTA in school.	First School (5-9+ years) 150 on roll	Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate Foundation Degree (Early

				Years) BA (Early Childhood Studies)
Colin	31	Full time – one of two HLTAs in school.	Pupil referral unit taking small groups of children between 7 and 13 years.	B Sc (Educational Psychology) PGCE
Linda	46	Full time -only HLTA in school.	Middle School (9-13 years) 480 on roll	Cache Level 3 (Teaching Assistant) NVQ2 (ICT) (Currently doing a Foundation Degree)
Mollie	53	Full time -only HLTA in school.	Primary School (3-11 years) 192 on roll	BTec (Nursery nurse) Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate
Mary	52	Full time – one of two HLTAs in school.	Primary School (3 – 11 years) 200 on roll	Specialist Teacher Assistant Certificate

Interview analysis

Specific responsibilities

Given the traditional focus of assistant work on children's basic skills, all interviewees had a substantial involvement in English and mathematics in terms of support for children alongside teachers in classrooms and working with groups of children away from teachers outside the classroom. There was also mention of setting up special initiatives for identified groups of children. For instance, Erica (all names are pseudonyms) talked about starting a project with Year One (five to six year olds) children 'who were struggling with phonics'. This meant planning and implementing the proposed work and also doing pre and post project testing to evaluate the benefits for the children. As she states, there was little teacher involvement in this:

> 'Yes that's going to be my sort of baby and I've spoken to the Year One teachers and they're quite happy for me to just take it off them.'

In addition to teaching English and mathematics our HLTAs had involvements across the curriculum and this required a range of knowledge. Jill, for instance, explained that she was currently involved in teaching physical education, religious education, art

and design technology, and personal, social and health education to Year Six children (10 to 11 year olds).

The extent to which subject knowledge and understanding of a curriculum area (for immediate class teaching purposes, at least) could be equivalent to that of a qualified teacher was illustrated by a full-time HLTA with some 20 years of experience as an assistant in her primary school:

> 'I was ill with pneumonia not long ago and the head teacher had to do that [science] lesson and I sent all the stuff and resources and everything in and, although he'd done one [plan] at home, he took mine instead.'

Given the way unexpected curriculum needs could arise, two interviewees mentioned that they could, sometimes quite suddenly, find themselves immersed in the deep end. Carol recounts such a situation and her solution:

> 'I'm teaching science. Now that is wonderful but my subject knowledge is kind of zilch so I've been on the internet and I've done research.'

Such resourcefulness and independence had resulted in the teachers giving her the name 'wonder woman.'

Jill showed a similar kind of resourcefulness. In her first year of being a HLTA she was asked to teach music with Year One children (five to six year olds). As she recalls:

> 'I had a brilliant time. I can't sing so [I thought] I may as well play an instrument … I don't think I've got a very good value about sound to be honest so [I said] I've got to make this work … I followed the [teacher's] planning but I had to do the resources and their planning was very limited …'

Parental contact

Our experience of training teaching assistants at The Open University suggests their contact with parents varies considerably from school to school. Some schools,

recognising that many of their assistants are local parents themselves, encourage them to develop communications in an outreach way, feeding back important information to teachers when necessary. Others feel teachers, as the qualified professionals, are best positioned to do this. With the exception of Linda, all our HLTAs said they had contact and collaboration with parents and they all said that any difficulties they experienced were reported to a teacher.

Yolanda and Mollie said they often bring classes in at the start of the day and this enabled regular informal contact with parents. As Yolanda said:

> '… parents will come to you and give information if they have concerns or if they want further information about what's happening during that day …'

Mollie ran an after school literacy club for children and their parents. She planned the activities and often integrated IT. At the end of this club, children went on to another club whilst their parents stayed to talk to Mollie about their children's learning and any concerns that they might have.

Jill, having been assigned the teaching of music with younger children, mentioned how she put on a Year One music event involving parents:

> 'I'd get everything down there - the xylophones and everything - and then I thought I'm going to get everything done if it kills me I'm going to do it and give them the best start in music that I can; and even parents came down and said they think this is wonderful. I had notes … and I'd been to a music course … I had to bring it together at the end and we did it on the field - two classes into groups of nine.'

Ways of working

Planning for children's educational experiences and, specifically, the curriculum in classrooms is assumed to be firmly within a teacher's jurisdiction (Adamson, 1999). Advice from the eleven signatories to the HLTA agreement states: 'Cover supervision occurs when there is no active teaching taking place. Pupils would continue their

learning by carrying out a pre-prepared exercise under supervision.' (TeacherNet, 2009). Although this situation might conceivably occur in some secondary classrooms, it seems both unrealistic and inappropriate for primary aged children and would surely severely limit their learning for a significant proportion of the week. Erica makes it clear that cover supervision is not as straightforward for her as policy makers assume:

> '… occasionally I will just slip in and if the plans are there that's fine … some of the subjects that I do, it might be PE or IT, I will plan those … I deliver the teachers plans but they leave it very much up to me how I do it … so it's not cover supervision, I'm actually teaching the children.'

So, even when Erica uses a teacher's lesson plan, there is still the issue of 'how I do it'. She has to make a plan work for the children. Cable (2008) highlights the part played by agency and mediation when teaching assistants work with children. Given the nature of work in primary classrooms - particularly the way children naturally want to interact with adults and with each other when learning – it's surprising that cover supervision was ever seen as feasible. However, as we have indicated above, the idea was more about finding a cost effective way of releasing teachers from classrooms than it was about a clear consideration of a workable role for HLTAs. 'Cover supervision' it would appear was also a form of words the majority of teachers' representatives could be persuaded to accept.

Our data contain much to suggest that all nine HLTAs were involved in planning at a number of levels. In some situations, for instance, it was clear that they might take full responsibility for planning certain activities. Mary (who has HLTA status but, due to school budget constraints, is not paid as a HLTA) makes this clear in the following, although there's some blurring of 'arranging' and 'planning':

> ' … we're off on a trip tomorrow … and that's me, I planned it all and I've booked it and I've organised everything and there's me and another teaching assistant taking the class.

Mollie, reflecting on the main difference between teachers and HLTAs, cites overall detailed planning as key:

> 'Well they [teachers] have obviously got a lot more responsibility regarding their planning [which] is more detailed than mine. They've got to plan for the whole of the curriculum whereas I only have certain areas that I have to plan for.'

Jill summarised the difference by saying 'teachers had to deal with more politics'.

Given their partial, and sometimes, full involvement in planning, finding time for this work was as much an issue for HLTAs as it is traditionally for teachers, which is why HLTAs were felt to be necessary, of course. Carol said a lot of her planning took place within the context of a team, which included teachers, but she also sometimes planned at home in her own time. Three of our interviewees were given timetabled time to plan. Linda, for instance, had an hour a week.

Jill recounts her initial response to the fact that she would need to plan the detail of science lessons:

> 'So I thought how do I plan? It all sounds very well but how do I do it? So I went and got the science files. I found out what modules we were following. I printed off the specific areas. I found out from the teacher what they were looking into and as it happened it was electricity the first time round now it's something else …'

There is much here that questions the idea that a lesson planned by a teacher can be overseen by a HLTA without the HLTA doing something to make the lesson successful – and that something would seem appropriately described as teaching.

In open recognition of the amount of planning they did, head teachers in Jill and Carol's schools had given them their own PPA time.

Carol was the only HLTA to mention a role difficulty which related to her work with two nursery teachers. She explained:

> 'I mean, one I work with is brilliant. I feel I'm on a par with her. But the other one treats me more like the old auxiliary nursery nurse … I've moved on but she hasn't.'

Oversight

According to official guidelines, HLTAs 'work strictly under the direction and guidance of a teacher' (TDA, 2008). However, this assumed responsibility may not be straightforward in practice, especially given the unpredictable nature of life in schools. Additionally, children don't organise their learning needs according to adults' formal responsibilities or availability (Eyres et al., 2004). This means that teaching assistants can often find themselves having to respond to unexpected issues of learning or behaviour without ready access to teacher guidance.

None of our interviewees highlighted oversight as a strong feature in their relationship with teachers. One consideration was familiarity. Carol explains:

> 'I've worked there for so long they know my work they know that when they step out, I step in, and I do exactly the job as they would like it to be done and they know I can do it …'

Some interviewees gave the impression that oversight could operate informally and, in a context where people know each well, this could be an effective supervisory arrangement. Erica highlighted her experience:

> '… sometimes she'll [teacher] say to me, because she's working on the laptop, is it alright if I stay in. Well, I mean, of course it's alright if she stays in – it's her classroom. I have no problems with the teacher being there, that's fine … so I think they value the fact I don't mind if they're coming in and out of the cupboard all the time …'

Colin (a HLTA but also a newly qualified teacher) worked alone with small groups of children in a pupil referral unit. Direct oversight of his work was not therefore a feature of his working context but he was part of a wider team which included another HLTA, educational psychologists, social workers, the police service and health visitors.

A number of our HLTAs were involved in guiding and managing the work and the training of teaching assistants. This role extension relates to 'direct the work of other adults in supporting learning' which is HLTA Standard 33 (TDA, 2007). In former pre-HLTA times, this role might be taken on by a deputy or perhaps a teacher who is a SENCO (special educational needs co-ordinator). Erica talked about her involvement:

> 'I line-manage the support staff. I initiated this year professional discussions and reviews and I have just updated the policy document for teaching support staff.'

She had been asked, by her head, to take on this overseeing role and had plans to support all support staff in terms of 'developing their professionalism'. She mentioned that she had encouraged two teaching assistants to start a Foundation Degree and was currently acting as their mentor. She felt, however, that it would take some time because some assistants continued to see themselves in an 'auxiliary mode'. Yolanda had a similar formal responsibility. She line-managed six teaching assistants and carried out their annual performance management.

Mary, although not paid as a HLTA, had been asked by the head teacher to 'have a chat' with the teaching assistants in her school but she emphasised that it was not officially linked to their performance management.

Patterns of deployment

Each of the interviewees was asked to describe a typical day in terms of their deployment. For a number, this wasn't easy due to the fact that their days could vary considerably. Yolanda gives a sense of her various involvements in her First School (for children from five to nine years):

> ‘I tend to only do four classes in a term because one of the classes has swimming during the term so we rotate … I’m doing Year One and Two at the moment. Year Two will go swimming next term but then I’ll do Year Four … I’ll do at least four classes each week.’

It seemed that each day carried a degree of unpredictability. There could be a need to cover for teacher sickness, teacher involvement in training, or even to stand in for a short while when a teacher needed to attend to something away from the classroom. Linda, working in a Middle School (9 – 13 years) captures this:

> ‘Right, a typical day … it has five set [maths] lessons and four on in-class support … for the rest it’ll be there’s someone absent or they’re on a course or something goes wrong then I just step in and do that … standing in at the last minute.’

Erica mentioned that she sometimes even found herself covering for teachers who were unable to do cover lessons for other teachers. The demands of switching between classes and ages of children appear quite challenging in terms of adaptability and knowledge. Yolanda said her head teacher had once commented that he wasn’t actually sure how she managed it which, she believed, was sincerely said.

For most of the schools involved it seemed that the flexible use of HLTAs (and teaching assistants) meant that supply teachers were rarely used to cover classes. Mollie said in her school, in an emergency, two teaching assistants might cover the class of an absent teacher or if they weren’t available she would cover it alone, sometimes supported by a teaching assistant.

Formal training and work related learning

Given that only one of our interviewees, Colin, had completed a PGCE, what enabled our HLTAs to carry out the above tasks – many of which can be seen to be within a teacher’s traditional jurisdiction?

Firstly, as we have indicated in the table above, all nine HLTAs have qualifications which are very relevant to their core work of providing learning support to children, and, in a number of cases, these qualifications are substantial. Erica, for instance, has a BA honours degree in Early Childhood Studies and Kate a Foundation Degree in Early Years.

High engagement with academic learning and propositional knowledge has not been a traditional feature of the teaching assistant workforce and a number of studies in the past have suggested that many assistants have modest formal qualifications (Hancock et al., 2002; Lee & Mawson, 1998; Smith, Kenner, Barton-Hide & Bourne, 1999). However, there is reason to think that this is changing as this workforce becomes more established and differentiated and obtains increased access to training - especially with regard to senior teaching assistants and HLTAs. Our HLTAs, it should be noted, were well qualified.

Professional knowledge and understanding developed through academic study have the potential to feed into workplace competence (Abbott, 1988; Eraut, 1994). However, qualifications involving work based learning – Linda's National Vocational Qualification (NVQ level 2) or Kate's Foundation Degree, for instance – would have direct relevance to practice.

Secondly, despite the formal qualifications of our interviewees, our data suggest that, in order to fulfil the kinds of involvements being assigned to them, they also had to be able to learn in situ. In addition to continuing professional development in terms of short courses and school-based training events, it was apparent that our HLTAs benefited from working closely with head teachers, teachers and other support staff in their schools and learnt from 'co-participation' (Billet, 2004) in work practices. A number of our HLTAs spoke highly of their head teacher's support. Erica, for instance, said:

> 'I'm extremely fortunate … I'm aware that the head teacher in this school values me both personally and professionally and that has a knock-on effect because it influences how the teaching staff approach me.'

This was not just a statement about the respect she received from teachers; it was also about her potential access to their practices and professional knowledge. Similar praise for a head teacher came from Mary who had started as a volunteer and who felt that her head had 'pulled everything out of her' and shown 'what she was capable of'.

Head teachers sought to use their appointed HLTAs with maximum flexibility and effect and deliberately (or inadvertently) promoted their access to practices and professional 'repertoires' (Lave & Wenger, 1991) across their schools. This has not always been the case for teaching assistants who, from our experience as university lecturers writing distance learning courses and assessing students, have not been well included in the professional life of schools, particularly if they are volunteer teaching assistants. A number of head teachers in our study were therefore doing much to enable their HLTAs to grow and develop in the workplace (McGregor, 2006/1960). They appeared to define a HLTA's jurisdiction according to their individual skills and abilities within a school and this gave rise to considerable variation of role and responsibility even within our small-scale study. Another interpretation, of course, could be that they were sometimes expecting a great deal from a HLTA as an unqualified teacher.

Conclusion

Addressing the first three aims of our study i.e. the HLTAs' specific responsibilities, ways of working and patterns of deployment, what can be concluded about their roles and job jurisdictions?

Each of our interviewees had quite wide ranging roles and involvements which were personally and socially constructed within their schools. They were also boundary crossers, frequently moving in and out of their own and teachers' roles within a day or a working week and this resulted in what Allen (2001, p. vii) refers to as 'fuzzy' occupational boundaries. It seemed too that head teachers were deploying these HLTAs as a flexible staffing resource that could be used with different aged children and to meet different curriculum needs as and when they arose. Linked to this was the use of the HLTAs as in-house supply teachers for absent teachers. This is an understandable development because the HLTAs were able to provide children with continuity – most had been working in their schools for between five and 20 years –

and such deployment in an emergency saved schools the expense of recruiting supply teachers.

The overlap of role and jurisdiction with teachers made it hard for the HLTAs to give us a clear sense of the division of labour, apart from the fact that they cover classes for teachers' PPA release. When pressed, the HLTAs tended to refer to backstage factors like teachers' overall responsibility, especially for planning and this accords with Adamson's (1998) finding over ten years ago.

When they did cover for PPA time, it seemed that our HLTAs were releasing teachers to attend to the extensive record keeping and 'laptop work' that all public service professionals now do. Blatchford et al (2009) provide support to this finding in terms of teaching assistants more generally. They found that an overall increase in individual attention for children was the result of interactions with support staff rather than with teachers (p. 126).

Because of their cover role (in reality, a class teaching role) our HLTAs were sharing in some of the whole class teaching work of teachers. Additionally, the HLTAs had colonised what Abbott (1988, p. 111) terms 'vacant jurisdictions'. Included here would be hands-on work with children that teachers might wish to do but have never had time to do, or work teachers have had to relinquish because of other demands on their time. Examples of the latter would be special projects of the sort that Erica mentions and supporting parent learning as with Mollie's after school literacy club. This, of course, runs counter to a policy discourse that HLTAs 'free teachers up to do what they do best: teach' (TDA, 2008).

Our data therefore reveal HLTAs entering into teachers' work and jurisdictions more as team-teaching colleagues rather than supervised para-professionals. Indeed, they confirmed that teacher oversight was, by and large, informal and sometimes, not provided when teachers were busy. We sensed that there was always deferment to teachers as the senior partners, however. Interestingly, we did not pick up any intra-occupational conflict as a result of what Abbott (1988) might describe as a HLTA 'assault' on teachers' work although, as we have said, we did not interview any

teachers. Carol was the only interviewee to mention a difficulty related to a nursery teacher who was not perceiving her as a HLTA, more as an 'auxiliary'.

With regard to our fourth research aim that is gaining insights into training and work related learning, co-participation and access to teacher professional repertoires go some way towards explaining how our HLTAs were learning in their schools. However, our respondents all confirmed that their new learning was not always guided by a teacher (as expert). In order to manage unexpected demands the HLTAs needed to be able to learn on the job in a more individualised, even solitary, way. They also had to improvise, be pro-active and self motivated – as Carol's science internet search illustrates. This kind of responsive learning requires confidence, flexibility and adaptability. Personal biographies and life histories were important here, as was familiarity with the routine practices of a school.

One difference between HLTAs and qualified teachers which was not mentioned by our interviewees was the fact that teacher training differs in many ways from training to be a HLTA. Traditionally, teachers begin with academic study and a 'frontloading of theory' (Eraut, 1994, p. 22) in terms of studying for a first degree and then a PGCE, or through studying for a specific degree in education (BEd). They gain (supervised) experience of working with children for around 18 weeks during a PGCE - longer if they are studying for a BEd. However, in terms of getting to know the ways of children, this is very different from the parenting and situated school experience of most teaching assistants and HLTAs.

Our interviewees had substantial experience of working with children so theoretical and codified knowledge could possibly be gained through practice. Additionally, they had studied for formal practice-based qualifications and these would support the development of practice-theory understandings. In order to cover and teach classes, our interviewees learnt about this aspect of a HLTA's role through the development of grounded craft approaches. They were not applying knowledge in practice situations in the way that initial teacher training requires teachers to do through their supervised practicum. English primary schools, therefore, now have two distinct forms of training and qualifications in co-existence for staff doing similar work. As

we have said, many of the HLTA standards do relate to the standards for teachers and Burgess and Shelton Mayes (2009) argue for a full alignment with teacher training for HLTAs.

Alexander (2010), however, raises concern that the professional standards for teachers (TDA, 2007) have shifted teacher training towards 'instrumental but not very specific accounts of skill allied to policy-driven information which teachers are expected to know' (p. 429). Is it therefore in the interests of schools and children, one might ask, for HLTAs (who currently appear to have scope for creativity in their practice) also to be trained is this seemingly narrow way?

We have mentioned the way in which some of our HLTAs showed resourcefulness (Jill's approach to Year One music, for instance) when they were asked to do things that their experience and formal qualifications had not directly prepared them for. Blatchford et al. (2009) confirm this finding and suggest teaching assistants and cover supervisors pick up subject and pedagogic knowledge by 'tuning in' to the way teachers do things. A school provides opportunities to try out practices with children. McLaughlin and Marsh (1978) suggest that professional learning needs to be an adaptive and heuristic process. This must be as true for teachers as it is for HLTAs. Trying practice out in classrooms and then improving it in the light of a personal evaluation of process and outcomes is a form of informal learning and, conceivably, a way of improving things. The ability to improvise is also important, of course, in terms of meeting the often unpredictable learning needs of children.

Despite their positive take on what they were doing, the degree of independence they were given and the status that came from working with whole classes, there was also perhaps a sense of isolation and a lack of support and oversight. The HLTA cover role separates HLTAs from teachers as team colleagues within a classroom - and reduces their opportunities to tune in to teachers' approaches. With the growth of support staff, teachers often have teaching assistants with them in their classrooms so teachers tend not to teach alone in this way.

A strength of our study is the way in which it taps into the experiences and views of those inside the specific role of a HLTA. However, there is, of course a need to

consider what our HLTAs say alongside the experiences and views of others, particularly the often under-researched views of children and parents. We wonder how parents view the inclusion of HLTAs as cover teachers of their children - a change which would have been seen as highly controversial even ten years ago and over which parents were not consulted.

Although they were doing their best to respond to the expectations of head teachers and teachers, our HLTAs seemed at times out of their depth. We therefore have to ask if, when covering a class, they were sometimes unavoidably diluting the practice of qualified and experienced teachers with implications for children's learning. For all their dedication and willingness to teach themselves new class teaching skills and the required curriculum knowledge, deploying HLTAs to cover classes in order to release teachers seemed not to be the best use of their training, abilities and time.

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